Why Do I Have To Take This Class?

GOVT 2305

Note: This is an abridged version of the slides I normally present. It condenses the information in the other slides, and is geared specifically to cover the information on the quizzes.

As you may know, GOVT 2305 introduces you to the government of the United States. It details the development and content of the Constitution and the principle institutions it creates, as well as the influence of political parties and elections and the various ways that the general population can influence the government.

This introductory set of slides is intended to welcome you to the class, and to address a question you undoubtedly ask about every class you are required to take.

Why?

Why is it important that you know this stuff? Why is this a required class?   
  
 Here’s an attempt at an answer: Because you are citizens of (or at least residents in) a [democratic republic](http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090209100726AAbYTuc). Which means that you are the basic building block on which government rests. The stability of the republic depends on you, and people like you.

Governments based on the people can be stable or unstable – just or unjust. The danger of democracy is mob rule.   
  
“Democracy” was a bad word to many of the founders. Probably not too different than the word “socialism” now.

This is a mob

Mobs are bad things.   
  
They are driven by passion and can be led to support all sorts of things.

A popular term used in its place was “[mobocracy](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mobocracy)” which was based on the Greek term “[ochlocracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ochlocracy)” which is a special, degraded form of democracy.   
  
It is rule by the people spoiled by a demagogue, that is “a political leader in a [democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy) who appeals to the emotions, fears, [prejudices](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prejudices), and [ignorance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ignorance) of the lower classes in order to gain power and promote political motives.”

The Wikipedia entry on Athenian democracy has a [section on the criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy) of it that details the deficiencies the founders were concerned about. The democracy would eventually be converted into an imperialist empire.

Everything governments do can be traced to a decision made by the general population.   
  
Think about that the next time you criticize the government for something it does. It is not a discrete and autonomous entity. At some point its actions can be traced to a grant of power supported by the general population – or at least an influential part of it.

People can even be persuaded to no longer support the concept of self government.  
  
We will discuss the attractiveness of oligarchy to some soon enough.

How can the public – in a democratic republic – be persuaded to support the preservation of it?  
  
People do not always do so.

“The tyranny of a prince is not so dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy.” – [Montesquieu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montesquieu).  
  
[Click here](http://www.ncsl.org/legislatures-elections/trust/trust-for-representative-democracy-civic-educatio.aspx) for a handful of   
other quotes on the same theme.

In a future lecture we will discuss the [Iron Law of Oligarchy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_law_of_oligarchy).  
  
There is a tendency in democracies for power to eventually be held by a small group of people. Sometimes this happens because that group usurps powers, but it can happen because the general population yields power to that group. They give up.

Here is more recent commentary:

“In his essay on *Representative Government*, John Stuart Mill identified three fundamental conditions. . . . These are: "One, that the people should be willing to receive it [representative government]; two, that they should be willing and able to do what is necessary for its preservation; three, that they should be willing and able to fulfill the duties and discharge the functions which it imposes on them." – [Jeane Kirkpatrick](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/dictatorships-double-standards/).

“Fulfilling the duties and discharging the functions of representative government make heavy demands on leaders and citizens, demands for participation and restraint, for consensus and compromise. It is not necessary for all citizens to be avidly interested in politics or well-informed about public affairs–although far more widespread interest and mobilization are needed than in autocracies.

What is necessary is that a substantial number of citizens think of themselves as participants in society’s decision-making and not simply as subjects bound by its laws. Moreover, leaders of all major sectors of the society must agree to pursue power only by legal means, must eschew (at least in principle) violence, theft, and fraud, and must accept defeat when necessary. They must also be skilled at finding and creating common ground among diverse points of view and interests, and correlatively willing to compromise on all but the most basic values.”

An educated, participatory and virtuous citizenry has always been considered to be necessary to the survival of a democratic republic.  
  
Our goal in this class is to address the former.

Why?   
  
Because democratic republics are fragile. History provides many examples of them losing public support and falling into anarchy and then despotism. This was a fact recognized by the many of the founders of the United States – at least those who wrote the Constitution.

What’s the proof? The respective fates of [Ancient Athens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Athens) and the [Roman Republic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Rome).  
  
Each crumbled after a while.  
  
The founders participated in an ongoing inquiry about why each ultimately failed. Suspicions were aimed at the fact that each was based on the people. Perhaps this did not allow a strong enough foundation for their governments.

Before we continue (and in case you are curious) what is a Democratic Republic?  
  
A [republic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic) is a type of government where the citizens choose the leaders of their country and the people (or at least a part of its people)have an impact on its government.-Wikipedia

In a republic, institutions – specifically legislative, executive and judicial institutions – lie between the people and the law.

In a democratic republic, the people are sovereign, but do not rule directly. They vote for people in some – but not all – governing positions and hold them accountable in periodic elections.   
  
They provide the basis for the legitimate actions of government.

They were especially interested in the factors that led the Roman Republic to transition into the [Roman Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire).  
  
They wanted to determine how to prevent this from occurring. The point being that it is one thing to establish a republic, another to sustain it.

The founders of the United States were concerned about why this happened and what could be done to avoid it.

What they learned was that in the [late period](http://www.roman-empire.net/republic/laterep-index.html) of the Roman Republic, Rome became chaotic, unstable, and ungovernable. Leaders were often corrupt and unpopular – or at least that’s how the general public saw them.

This instability and corruption led to a general contempt towards the governing system.   
  
Which led to civil war.

[Julius Caesar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Caeser) took advantage of this chaos and worked to consolidate power.

He had been appointed [consul](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_consul) by [the Senate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senate_of_the_Roman_Republic), which possessed the executive powers of the state, but used this position to gradually expanded his powers over Senate.

He failed because he was [assassinated](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_Julius_Caesar) by Senators who were aware of his plans.   
  
You probably heard the phrase [Et tu, Brute?](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Et_tu,_Brute%3F). (Here’s some information about [Marcus Junius Brutus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Junius_Brutus), one of the conspirators – these names will matter soon enough)

Much of what Caesar did was done with the support of the people of Rome who were becoming angry with a Senate they saw as corrupt and more supportive of the rights of wealthy landowners than of them.   
  
They supported the expansion of Caesar’s power.   
  
This is the key point: The general population was actually supportive of the shift from a republic to an empire. This fact concerned the framers of the US Constitution.

This is a key lesson learned by the framers of the Constitution. This is what they hoped to prevent when they designed the Constitution  
  
Since the people of Rome supported Caesar’s usurpation of power, they believed democracies were problematic. As we will note soon enough, they were wary of the democratic systems established in the several states under the Article of Confederation.

While Julius Caesar failed, his nephew [Augustus Caesar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustus) would succeed in establishing an empire where has was able to control all aspects of power.  
  
*(Here’s a quick* [*video*](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njboMJDSCKQ&feature=related) *about him.)*  
  
And here is a claim that [he was one of history’s great leaders](http://www.vox.com/2014/8/19/6044617/caesar-augustus-died-2000-years-ago-heres-why-he-was-one-of-historys).

Here is a problematic twist on this shift: After the transition, the chaotic Roman republic became a more peaceful empire. After Augustus there would be over 200 years of peace in Rome, This was called [the Pax Romana](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Romana).  
  
This creates a dilemma: Which system is preferable?

So the question became: What factors led to the decline of the Republic, and could the decline have been prevented?   
  
In short: Is a republic – a system of government based on the people - sustainable?

There was a general belief among the educated around the time of the founding that civilizations tended to have a life cycle that followed a specific pattern.  
  
A 19th century artist, Thomas Cole, made this the subject of a series of paintings called [The Course of Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Course_of_Empire).

The Savage State

The Pastoral State

The Consummation of Empire

Destruction

Desolation

The founders bought into the idea that governments had life cycles. One was likely to devolve into the next – [here’s a look at Plato’s analysis of political regimes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato's_five_regimes).

The founders argued that there was little evidence in history that republics survive very long.  
  
[Here’s a Wikipedia page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_republics) that lists the republics that have existed over history. The brevity of those in antiquity and the Middle Ages worried the constitution’s framers.

Is there a way to halt this process?   
  
Can a democratic republic be established that resists the chaos that leads to anarchy and then to tyranny? This was a question the framers of the Constitution posed as well.

[Benjamin Franklin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Franklin) put it this way in an exchange alleged to have taken place as he walked out of [Independence Hall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Hall) at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention:

Mrs. Powel: "Well Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?"   
  
Benjamin Franklin: "[A republic if you can keep it](http://quotationsbook.com/quote/44771/)“

[Abraham Lincoln](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln) would also ask the question, posed differently, during [a challenge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War) to the preservation of the republic:

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. …”  
  
Abraham Lincoln  
The opening of the [Gettysburg Address](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gettysburg_Address)

So why are republics difficult to maintain?  
  
The founders argued that the basic problem stems from [human nature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_nature). Are we naturally co-operative or do we like to fight? Are we willing to make sacrifices for the greater good or are we purely self interested? Can we contain our ambition?

But the founders were not certain that the general public (you and I) were up to the task.  
  
They assumed that people tended to be more focused on short term personal needs, which is not conducive to the maintenance of a Republic. They also assumed the general population lacked the knowledge necessary to govern effectively.

When we look at the [Federalist Papers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federalist_Papers), we will note the authors assumed that human nature was flawed and unchangeable, so the design of the constitution had to compensate for that.   
  
Two traits specifically stood out.

Many argued that the role of the general population needed to be curtailed in order to maintain stability.  
  
Here’s a quote from [Alexander Hamilton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Hamilton).

“For my part, I am not much attached to the *majesty of the multitude,* and therefore waive all pretensions (founded on such conduct), to their countenance. I consider them in general as very ill qualified to judge for themselves what government will best suit their peculiar situations; nor is this to be wondered at. The science of government is not easily understood. Cato will admit, I presume, that men of good education and deep reflection, only, are judges of the *form* of a government; whether it is constituted on such principles as will restrain arbitrary power, on the one hand, and equal to the exclusion of corruption and the destruction of licentiousness on the other”   
  
- ([Caesar #2](http://www.infoplease.com/t/hist/federalist/caesar2.html)) 10/17/1787 Alexander Hamilton

It also tells us something about attitudes towards popular participation by those in charge of politics at that time. They saw little reason to expand participation beyond a small set of elites. The expansion of participation over time will occupy us in future sections.

[Here’s a link to a speech given](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch16s26.html) by [James Madison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Madison) where he wrestles with the expansion of the right to vote to those without property.

Their general attitude was that the greater population did not have the leisure necessary to educate themselves in order to be proper participants in the political process.

Also, like many other wealthy landowners, Madison was worried that expanding the right to participate politically to non-property owners would allow them to vote against their property rights. As we will see in a couple weeks, under the Article of Confederation many state legislatures began questioning the distribution of property.

Here’s an irony, given that we prioWhat’s worse, democratic republics tend to develop the very factors that will lead to their demise.   
  
Freedom leads to conflict.

The freer people are, the more they can engage in conflict over social affairs, including how government ought to be run and over who ought to be in charge. This can create further dissension that can lead to the dismantling of the republic.

A key question asked by the framers of the Constitution was what system of government, if any, can best preserve order and liberty in the long run? “To secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity.”

Can a society be both ordered and free? Here’s a provocative read: [Renewing Our Experiment in Ordered Liberty](http://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-8-number-5/renewing-our-experiment-ordered-liberty)

Can Democracy?

Democracies are inevitably unstable.  
  
[James Madison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Madison) would make this case in [Federalist #10](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federalist_No._10): “The instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular Governments have everywhere perished”  
  
We will read through this document soon.

Alexander Hamilton (later, when he seemed to have moderated his stance on the capabilities of the general public) would claim that this was the question America was to answer for the world.

“It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”  
  
- Publius (Alexander Hamilton), [Federalist #1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federalist_No._1)

Would people make the right choice – rationally and deliberately – or would they allow events to determine how they were governed?   
  
An understanding of the principles of government is argued necessary to maintain the republic. That’s what this class is supposed to accomplish.

But here’s the problem:  
  
Most public opinion surveys demonstrate that people lack the knowledge about governmental issues, and the attentiveness to politics that was expected necessary by the founders.

Some links to some disturbing poll results:  
  
- [PEW Research](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1804/political-news-quiz-iq-deficit-defense-spending-tarp-inflation-boehner)  
- [How Dumb Are We?](http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/03/20/how-dumb-are-we.html)**-** [Is voter ignorance killing democracy?](http://www.salon.com/books/it/1999/11/22/voter/print.html)

Here are past items I’ve posted on the blog about the subject:   
  
[Political Ignorance](http://theweakerparty.blogspot.com/search/label/political%20ignorance)  
[Political Knowledge](http://theweakerparty.blogspot.com/search/label/political%20knowledge)

An old study once pointed out that more people could name the Three Stooges and any three members of the Supreme Court.

Does political ignorance threaten democracy?  
  
Some thoughts from the Cato Institute [here](http://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/when-ignorance-isnt-bliss-how-political-ignorance-threatens-democracy) and [here](http://www.cato.org/pubs/policy_report/v21n4/cpr-21n4.html).

As we saw with Hamilton, many founders expected that the mass public would be incapable of self-government and purposely limited participation to a ruling class that would have the ability to govern effectively.  
  
Cato Institute: [Why Policymakers Should Ignore Public Opinion Polls](http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa402.pdf).

This was one of the reasons why participation was limited to property owners for much of American history. Here’s an instructive quote:   
  
[*Those who own America ought to govern it.*](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Jay)- [John Jay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Jay)

We have evolved into a more full democracy than we were at our founding.   
  
This is a good thing in that more people are able to have influence over the laws that govern them, but problematic in that it leads to even more conflict and increases the possibility of social unrest due to ambition and self interested behavior.

How can participation be expanded without creating unrest?  
  
By educating the public – or at least those deemed most likely to be able to participate. It is assumed that educated citizenry can more effectively govern itself than an uneducated one.

Thomas Jefferson was an early promoter of civic education. He was a driving force behind two pieces of legislation that promoted education.  
  
1- [A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0079).  
  
2 - [The Northwest Ordinance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest_Ordinance).

*“Whereas it appeareth that however certain forms of government are better calculated than others to protect individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and are at the same time themselves better guarded against degeneracy, yet experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that, possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes.” – From the Preamble.*

Here is James Madison’s definition of tyranny:   
  
The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny. – [Federalist 47](http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_47.html).

In a nutshell, that is what this class is about – what an educated republic is supposed to be able to do. To recognize attempts to establish tyranny, and how to adequately respond to it.

[The Northwest Ordinance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest_Ordinance) (1787) established the rules regarding the development of the territory that would become Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin ([click here for background from the Library of Congress](http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/northwest.html)).  
  
It encouraged the development of schools.

*Art. 3. Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.*

Here’s a problem. The national government has no delegated power to create and maintain education facilities.   
  
Education is considered to be one of the powers reserved to the states, though the national government has expanded its jurisdiction over education in recent decades. It did facilitate the development of land grant colleges in the 19th Century and uses the implied powers of the Constitution to fund all levels of education.

Education was also assumed to be important to the founders of the [Republic of Texas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Texas). At least to the ruling class.  
  
One of the grievances in the [Texas Declaration of Independence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas_Declaration_of_Independence) concerned the Mexican government’s refusal to establish schools.

*“It [the Mexican Government] has failed to establish any public system of education, although possessed of almost boundless resources, (the public domain,) and although it is an axiom in political science, that unless a people are educated and enlightened, it is idle to expect the continuance of civil liberty, or the capacity for self government.”*

Starting in 1845 the Texas Constitution – each of them - has contained a separate article mandating that the state support and maintain public schools.

[Article VII](http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/constitutions/text/IART07.html) of the Texas Constitution of 1876 begins by stating the following:   
  
SECTION 1. A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools.

Consider the language for a moment.  
  
Without knowledge, the rights and liberties of the people cannot be maintained. But notice the requirement that adequate provisions be made to establish educational institutions. Texas is notorious for both underfunding public education and high levels of inequality in how schools are funded.

[Access to quality education](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/civil_rights_education.htm) across racial and ethnic groups was a [principal goal of the civil rights movement](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-segregation.html). This fits with the idea that an educated individuals are more effective citizens.   
  
Conversely, denial of access to education was a way to ensure a secondary status for certain populations. This confirms the importance of public education to effective citizenship.

Here’s a look at three areas of education discrimination:   
  
[African Americans and Education](https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kde02)  
[Mexican Americans and Education](https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/khmmx).  
[Female Education in the United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_education_in_the_United_States).

The Texas Constitution contains language authorizing the creation of public universities.   
  
Here it is:

Section 10 of Article VII allows for the development of a university:   
  
Sec. 10.  ESTABLISHMENT OF UNIVERSITY; AGRICULTURAL AND MECHANICAL DEPARTMENT. The legislature shall as soon as practicable establish, organize and provide for the maintenance, support and direction of a University of the first class, to be located by a vote of the people of this State, and styled, "The University of Texas," for the promotion of literature, and the arts and sciences, including an Agricultural, and Mechanical department.

In the 1890s, a push for two year colleges began in the state. In fact the [junior college movement](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kdj02) began in Texas before it spread nation-wide.  
  
Those are not contained in the Constitution, but rather in the Education Code.

[Chapter 130](http://www.statutes.legis.state.tx.us/Docs/ED/htm/ED.130.htm) of the Texas Education Code outlines the design and the rules regarding junior colleges (now community colleges) in the state.  
  
[Alvin Community College](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin_Community_College) is authorized in Section 130.163.

In 1965, the Texas Legislature established the [Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board](http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/) ([TSHA website](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mdtpx)) “to provide unified planning and development of a comprehensive system of [higher education](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/khhxr).”  
  
It sets curriculum for state colleges and universities, including the requirement that you have to take two classes in order to get a degree form a public university (note that this requirement does not apply to private institutions).

And what’s the purpose of all this?   
  
Let’s review the statement made in the Texas Declaration of Independence

*“ . . . it is an axiom in political science, that unless a people are educated and enlightened, it is idle to expect the continuance of civil liberty, or the capacity for self government.”*

Which sounds like a good rationale for this class – a good idea about what you are supposed to be able to use this information for. You are to know the essential principles of government so that you both enjoy freedom, yet exist in a stable society.  
  
Good luck with it.

The next section introduces you to some key terms and definitions that will be useful to remember as we go forward in class.